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ABSTRACT

During periods of social change neighborhoods are redefined and/or created by external and internal factors. Political, economic and social factors act as catalysts for neighborhood change by developing symbols by which an area is identified. Neighborhoods are formed by expounding on the new image most sought out by the exponents of the more powerful political, economic and social factions of the city. In part, efforts can be made to sell the new image by developing organizations that reflect the basic values with which the community will identify. This paper explores the process of neighborhood change and revitalization in Chelsea Park, an Atlanta neighborhood, as viewed by long term and short term residents of the community, real estate personnel, city representatives, and members of voluntary associations associated with this neighborhood. A model to account for change in neighborhoods undergoing social change is developed that may prove useful to urban planners and others interested in this kind of research. (Author/GC)

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CREATING NEIGHBORHOOD IDENTITY IN A SOUTHERN CITY

by

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Creating Neighborhood Identity in a Southern City

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INTRODUCTION

Within the last several years social scientists have become increasingly involved in urban research dealing with the process of neighborhood maintenance and identification (Gans:1979; Fishman and Hill:1979; Miracle and Yanoshik:Und). Work has been done on symbolic communities (Hunter:1974), and the relationship of specific geographical areas to neighborhood identity. For the most part, this research has been carried out in northern cities with little emphasis in the Southeast.

In an earlier paper Fishman and Hill (1979) began to develop a typology of urban neighborhoods for Atlanta. A modified version of this typology may be useful for understanding the concept of neighborhood in the South. The first type of neighborhood organization, and the one that has predominated in all hierarchial levels of neighborhood development in Atlanta is the racial community, based on a division of the city into Black and White residential areas. A second type of organization is based on measures of social class defined within the racial framework. A third type is occupational communities, usually made up of rural southern migrants who maintain their identity through shared patterns of behavior, common heritage, and socioeconomic status.

The next two types of neighborhood identity are the most recent additions to the southern neighborhood typology and warrant more detailed discussion. The fourth type is the development of communities based on common heritage or ethnicity. The fifth type is the development of neighborhoods as residential communities based on shared common goals affected by social, economic and political factors.

Historically, neighborhood formation in the South has not paralleled the neighborhood process in northeastern cities. Ethnic identification has been relatively insignificant in the South. Hylan' (und.) has found that "historically Memphis does not have a neighborhood defined principally by ethnic identification," while Fishman and Hill (1979:2) have observed for Atlanta that "ethnic enclaves have for the most part been insignificant in the formation of neighborhoods as a result of the South's historically peculiar policies regarding race, religion and social class."

Recently, Atlanta has experienced great change as a result of rural-urban migration[2], North-South migration, and increased immigration into Atlanta by Hispanic[3] and Asian[4] populations. The South was not conducive to the development of ethnic enclaves. Rather than adapting through ethnic neighborhoods, foreign born ethnics adapted to the city through private networks (Hill 1975). Atlantans view all ethnics, regardless of national heritage, as being foreign-born, and cluster them together as non-English speakers (Fishman 1979). Furthermore, those individuals are then categorized by race and social class. This traditional level of categorization combined with the

ethnics adaptive measures through self help and personal networks had the effect of maintaining the traditional social boundaries of the South. The exception to the rule is the development of a specific international neighborhood made up of members of many ethnic groups and primarily based on social class. Thus, overall, the status quo based on race and social class is maintained. Today, the neighborhood concept based on functions of increasing levels of shared need and interaction among residents of the neighborhood, defined primarily on residential and territorial unity, has become of major significance.

This paper will deal with the creation of neighborhood identity based on the interaction of the social, political and economic factors within the framework of the traditional levels of neighborhood identity in the South. This is accomplished through the development of a model that accounts for neighborhood change occurring during the process of urban revitalization in downtown Atlanta.

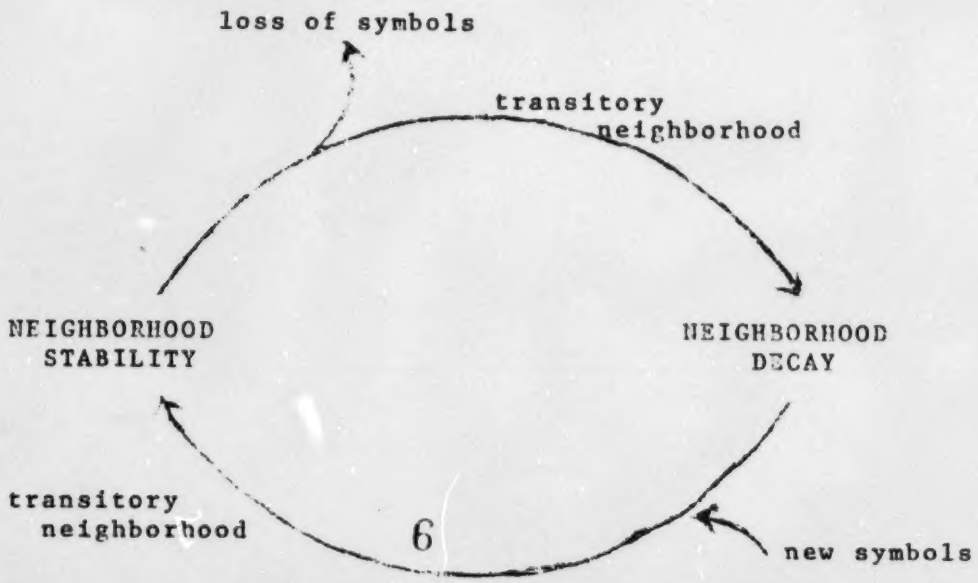
A Model of Neighborhood Change

By viewing the ethnic situation in Atlanta we see that the expectations of native Atlantans include a conscious effort toward assimilation on the part of the ethnic community based on race and class. Rather than the creation of ethnic neighborhoods, communities develop in response to shared common needs, thus functioning more as voluntary associations. Individuals relate t specific neighborhoods as a result of their ability to identify with a particular set of symbols that exemplify the neighborhood. I believe

that it is the manipulation of these symbols that changes a neighborhood from one identity to another. Thus, for ethnics, it is the development of an international neighborhood based on similar problems and needs. This same process may be applied to other components in the urban environment.

Within a situation-specific temporal framework, neighborhoods develop in response to a number of external political and economic factors, and internal social factors that serve to develop and fix a neighborhood identity. We can view this according to the following model. A fixed neighborhood undergoing stress disrupts the stable identity. This in turn causes the fixed identity to enter a transitory stage with less of a shared neighborhood identity. This is often accompanied by the loss of symbols that have, in the past, been used to define that area. Change in the make-up of the neighborhood occurs through the introduction of new symbols, which are in turn manipulated and modified, resulting in a new set of shared symbols and the creation of a new neighborhood identity. (See diagram below)

A MODEL OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE



Revitalization and Neighborhood Change

Ethnographic and survey research in one intown Atlanta neighborhood, Chelsea Park[5], has led to the development of the above model. Urban renewal has occurred in part in response to a city undergoing rapid urbanization with a steady increase in population size, mostly a result of rural-urban and North-South migration. Between 1950 and 1979 we see an expansion from 747,626[6] to approximately 1,750,000, a 133% increase. The addition of so many non-native born Atlantans is having a profound affect on the urban makeup of the city, enhanced by the continuing efforts by the city and state toward the development of an international urban center.

One of the responses by the city of Atlanta to the current changes is the support of the urban renewal efforts and as a catalyst to the development of strong neighborhood units with significant linkages to the political and social fabric of the city. Prior to this last decade, the neighborhood had little significance for planning and development, and virtually no political or economic autonomy. Today, the neighborhood has taken on new meaning with significant political, social and economic implications. The BOND organization (Bass Organization for Neighborhood Development), was created in 1969 as a response to the city's plans to close down an in-town public school. This voluntary association organized five in-town areas at a large meeting to protest the city's actions. After three years, BOND started independent neighborhood organizations in these five in-town neighborhoods.

This was a tremendous catalyst to the beginnings of the urban renewal effort which in turn was supported by the city government and the commercial and economic leaders who had interests in the downtown properties. Furthermore, a new city charter enacted in 1973 required the City Bureau of Planning to involve citizens in their planning activities. The bureau was required to divide the city into geographical units called Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU) which grouped neighborhoods together for planning purposes. The NPU and neighborhood boundaries, set forth by the Bureau of Planning, were adopted by the Atlanta City Council in 1975.[7]

Let us begin to look at how economic, political and social factors begin to redefine the inner city area by developing and creating a neighborhood identity. This will be explored by briefly discussing these variables within the context of one contemporary urban neighborhood, Chelsea Park.

As a result of research into the neighborhood process in Atlanta this author contends that neighborhoods are created, defined, and maintained through a process that feeds back into both the external and internal factors that affect urban renewal. The external factors are political variables such as the Neighborhood Planning Bureau, Neighborhood Associations, and city government: economic factors include the Atlanta Board of Realtors, and strong commercial interests dependent on the creation of a stable intown neighborhood identity. The internal factors are based on the creation of a communication system among residents and subcommunities within the neighborhood that serve to redefine the area through the manipulation of

neighborhood identity, and the creation of a new set of symbols which serves to define the neighborhood.

Interviews with neighborhood residents, real estate personnel, NPU planners, and members of neighborhood organizations and commercial enterprises in the area, allowed me to explore the relationships between those responsible for the creation of the Chelsea Park identity.

Chelsea Park: A Study in Urban Renewal

Chelsea Park is a neighborhood undergoing revitalization in response to the urban renewal process. The area was incorporated as a town in 1898 twenty years after the appearance of a post office, and annexed to the city in 1909. The area developed as a residential community, and was greatly enhanced by a trolley service that ran up its main thoroughfare. The park was donated by a prominent citizen in 1922 and since then has served as one of the areas focal points. The current neighborhood name was taken from the name of the park by the Bureau of Planning in the early 1970s and is currently used by the City of Atlanta, and appears on the Atlanta neighborhoods map designed by the Bureau of Planning in response to the new city charter. Interviews with long term residents indicate that these boundaries do not always correspond with ther traditional perception of the area, nor is the name necessarily the same. It was the responsibility of the Bureau of Plannings to develop boundaries which would serve a practical function. Today, the name Chelsea Park has received wide recognition and is used by

Real Estate people, the Chelsea Park Neighborhood Association (which was started around 1972) and is the official neighborhood name designated by the BOND organization.

The area underwent a long period of urban decay throughout the 1950s and the 1960s characterized by neighborhood deterioration due to a number of economic and political variables, the development of multiple housing units from single family homes, a trend toward renter occupied units, and a reputation as a neighborhood for transients and members of the lower socioeconomic classes. Furthermore, this previously predominantly White neighborhood was later characterized as racially mixed. All these factors accounted for a reputation as a less than desirable area for middle-class inhabitants, and did not conform to the traditional residence patterns of southerners.

The late 1960s saw the beginning of the urban renewal process in Atlanta with the revitalization of homes in areas that had not experienced the same level of urban decay as Chelsea Park. These relatively stable neighborhoods, located north and northwest of Chelsea Park, characterized by larger and more expensive homes, began to revitalize first. These may be perceived as the primary areas of urban renewal. Considered by purchasers to be relatively stable, these primary areas became popular among young professional, white collar, middle class peoples who replaced older residents sharing similar values. At this early stage of urban renewal, Chelsea Park was not considered a stable, residential area, and did not attract this middle class group.

Another group of younger more radical community members, perceiving themselves as "urban pioneers"[8], began to move into the Chelsea Park area looking, according to one informant,

> to live in the inner city. (Our) image was it's real nice to be a mixed economic and mixed racial area, and to stabilize at this level.

These urban pioneers espoused the desire to live in a mixed community and began to be perceived by outsiders as radicals, adventurous folks and artistic types. They began to actively renovate their homes and property, some setting up commercial enterprises in the delapidated storefronts on the main thoroughfare. These included woodwork shops, used clothing stores, a food cooperative and a tavern cooperative. This in turn attracted more urban pioneers.

Thus, we have two distinct phases of urban renewal. One, the primary phase, the replacement of senior citizens by younger populations in relatively stable inner city areas, and, two, a secondary phase, a more radical movement into non-stable inner city areas by individuals who did not necessarily share the value systems of the primary urban renewal group.

The primary urban renewal efforts proved to be quite successful. Due to the limited number of homes available in these areas, the homes quickly enhanced in value. These individuals who could have at one time afforded houses in the primary urban renewal areas were closed out due to changing economic circumstances and a lack of availability of the older homes. Thus, the revitalization effort began to shift toward other urban areas.

Chelsea Park, because of its similar, although smaller and less prestigious housing, began to attract some of these buyers who are more adventurous and willing to take a chance on a not yet revitalized area. Real estate personnel quickly seized on the idea as economically advantageous and began to sell the Chelsea Park area, bestowing the values normally associated with the primary urban renewal areas on this location. According to one real estate informant:

> This area is improving. A lot of the poorer families see the value (of selling).

When questioned on what do you sell when you sell Chelsea Park, one real estate informant put it this way:

> . . .We sell dreams. When you can see some of these houses before and after, its like going into another world. People have the vision. People want something they can make beautiful.

On the changes in the kind of people moving in, this same informant replied:

> Well, less of the urban pioneer mystique, you know (today it is) buy an old house, fix it up and hope everybody else would do the same - Before it was different. More of an urban pioneer mentality. Five years ago people were taking chances, now they don't. Now it's a solid economic investment.

Envisioning Chelsea Park as the potential non-conforming, racially mixed haven for children of the 1960s, espousing the liberal values of that time period, today the urban pioneer feels that the area seems to be changing, representing instead the values of the primary renewal area. Rental units are being bought out by private owners and turned back into single family dwellings. As a

result, the population is decreasing, and the overall makeup of Chelsea Park is beginning to reflect the values of the new residents. According to one neighborhood informant, the revitalization effort is:

> turning out a primarily Appalachian subculture community who used to live there, who originally lived in I.P. (an early revitalized neighborhood), and when I.P. boarding houses closed down, they moved into Chelsea Park. And, now that Chelsea Park has been brought up, I don't know where they are moving. Probably G.P. (another intown neighborhood beginning the urban renewal process) or other areas, wherever the rental property is in the city.

The early attraction of a racially and socially mixed neighborhood, is a pattern somewhat alien to the traditional order of the South. Early urban pioneers representing a different value system, were not a significant enough group to control and create the neighborhood identity they wanted. Other more powerful factors, especially the economic ones, began to take over. According to one informant:

> If you want to maintain the mixed racial area...there needs to be an attraction of middle income-middle class Blacks on a peer level with the White renovations coming in-and that's not occurring. Blacks at the same level are moving into Black renovated areas of the city, so there's no mix.

The traditional racial segregation common to the South is thus maintained.

In summary, so far what we see is the beginning of a revitalization process started by a group of individuals who chose an area that exemplified neighborhood values not often available in the South. These include racial and social heterogeneity and a mixed

social class. At the same time that these early pioneers began to move into the area, the city, undergoing rapid change and the creation of a new city charter created artificial neighborhood boundaries, thus beginning to create a basis for a stable neighborhood identity. The neighborhood, a result of changing economic conditions, a widening housing market in the inner city, begins to attract a new kind of urban renovator. This in turn is quickly seized on by real estate personnel who see the economic advantages of the area, and in turn begin to sell the image to an expanding market.

The New Neighborhood Image

The creation of a new image for a neighborhood is dependent on the manipulation and creation of symbols that are acceptable to a more homogeneous population. The kind of person who now moves to Chelsea Park views himself as a vital part of the current trend toward urban renewal.

Chelsea Park is beginning to take on the appearance of a well groomed, revitalized urban neighborhood. New residents are seeking an economically stable neighborhood, and desire to see their lower class neighbors replaced by more young people who share a similar economic status. More and more young professionals are moving in, and the houses have increased in value, assuring that this trend continues. One neighborhood resident of two years discussed the nature of the area saying:

> Every kind of person lives here. One of the things I like about it (Chelsea Park). It is trying hard to become White middle class like I.P.

This kind of sentiment is often expressed by the new residents. Another resident says:

> I think its going up hill and improving. I like that...

Most new residents are buying into the area because they like the new spirit associated with the area, and the restoration process going on in the intown neighborhoods. Most of these recent neighborhood residents also reflect a more white collar professional status. Another significant and often mentioned reason associated with moving to Chelsea Park is exemplified by one informant who had moved to this area less than six months ago. She said:

> Chelsea Park was individualistic, yet a community spirit. There are lots of artists, bright young professionals in the midst of a great deal of poverty.

She also discussed the Bohemian quality of Chelsea Park, although she was attracted to Chelsea by its early urban pioneer mystique: she thinks that the area will lose its economic mix, which she then qualified by saying "On one level I won't like this."

The older more permanent residents of Chelsea Park are beginning to recognize and relate to the neighborhood change. One resident of 20 years said:

> When we came to look at this house, our first impression was privacy, trees. Today, it is a place of recreation for young people, a nice place to live.

Many of the older residents are still concerned with the racial heterogeneity. Yet, for the most part, the neighborhood is regaining an image of a quiet, middle class residential community, the values currently espoused by the Chelsea Park Neighborhood Organization that reflects the changing values of the neighborhood residents.

Conclusion

The process of neighborhood change can be accounted for by the model expounded upon earlier. Political, economic and social factors act as catalysts for neighborhood change by helping develop a framework for the new symbols that are replacing the old symbols of traditional intown neighborhoods. The creation of a new neighborhood identity which includes economic stability may be the eventual outcome for the Chelsea Park area.

Communities are formed according to a number of varied stimuli that serve to expound on the image most sought out by exponents of the more powerful political, economic and social factions of the city. Some of these are based on traditional southern levels of integration including race and social class. In part, the new image may be created by members outside the residential community, but are dependent on the acceptance of the image by old and new residents. Even more than first acceptance, efforts may be made to sell the image by controlling the economic, political and social variables. This is in part accomplished by creating organizations that reflect these basic values with which the community will eventually identify.

Notes

1. This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the 78th Meeting of the American Anthropological Association Nov. 27-Dec 1 in Cincinnati. Special thanks to Robert Blakely and Ina Jane Wundram for their helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper, and Gail T. Smith and Mike Giglio for their fieldwork assistance. Also, I'd like to acknowledge Jean Reed for typing the manuscript.

2. For a discussion of rural-urban migration to Atlanta see Hefner, James A., "Push-Pull Determinants of Southern Black and White Migrants to a Southern Urban Labor Market". In Press: Phylon.

3. The major Hispanic groups in Atlanta include Cuban and Mexican peoples, although all other groups are also represented.

4. The major Asian populations are Japanese, Thais and Chinese, with some Vietnamese.

5. Chelsea Park is a pseudonym for a neighborhood in Northeast Atlanta undergoing urban renewal.

6. From "1977 Population and housing", prepared by Atlanta Regional Commission 1977:8.

7. This information comes from a City Bureau of Planning draft for a NPU Summary.

8. This term is used by Chelsea Park residents when referring to early urban renovators.

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